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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECLARATION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF INTOLERANCE AND OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RELIGION OR BELIEF

Letter dated 24 January 1994 from the Permanent Representative of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the Chairman of the forty-ninth session of the Commission on Human Rights

The Permanent Mission of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations at Geneva presents its compliments to the Chairman of the Commission on Human Rights, H.E. Mr. Mohamed Ennaceur, and has the honour to transmit herewith a letter dated 31 December 1993 addressed to the Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance by the Federal Minister for Human and Minority Rights, Ms. Margit Savovic.

We would kindly ask you to have your office transmit the enclosed letter to the Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance, Mr. A. Amor, and to have it circulated as an official document of the fiftieth session of the Commission on Human Rights (31 January to 11 March 1994) under agenda item 20: Implementation of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

Dear Sir,

As the Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance of the Commission on Human Rights you are surely well aware of the profound importance of religious differences in the current civil war in the territory of the former SFRY, as well as of how big a role they played during the Second World War.

The three conflicting national groups in the former Yugoslavia - the Serbs, Croats and Muslims - are peoples of South Slav origin. By their origin, language, culture and mentality the Serbs and the Croats are exceptionally close, so that, besides their somewhat different histories, their main difference is precisely religion. When the Muslims are in question, the importance of religion is even greater, for this community, which was proclaimed a nation only in 1968, is predominantly of Serb and to a somewhat lesser extent of Croat origin. Islam came to this territory during the Turkish occupation which lasted from the end of the 14th to the beginning of the 18th century. Over that period a part of the Slav population underwent Islamization. Since 1968 the Yugoslav Muslims have been the only nation whose name actually denotes religion, which is the only element of its specificity. All the other Muslims in the world in addition to their Muslim characteristics also have ethnic, i.e. national ones which make them Arabs, Turks, Iranians, etc.

The described closeness of the three conflicting national groups in the former SFRY and the fact that religion is one of the key elements of their differences have led to religious objects and other religious property being one of the basic targets of attacks and destruction. In addition to the live opponent, the things making him different and, according to the belief of the destroyer, making him the opponent, are also being destroyed.

As is the case with many other facts associated with this war, in respect of the destruction of sacred objects untruths have been created and disseminated, facts made up or the existing ones concealed and distorted.

Given the importance of your mandate and your personal integrity, proven on numerous occasions, the Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Ministry I am heading and I personally place great hopes in your help in clarifying facts and informing the relevant factors and the entire world public of the truth about what is happening in these territories.

Drawing on the bitter experience gained before and in the course of the ongoing Yugoslav crisis and the civil war, we in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia accord particular importance to the greatest possible exposure of the events in question in the former SFRY and the most wide-ranging promotion of the truth about them, regardless of whether it plays into the hands of Serbs or is harmful to their interests, for our recent experience has shown that peace can be the victim of presentation and dissemination of blatant and dangerous untruths. Namely, the Yugoslav war was preceded by a campaign of horrendous proportions, still on even today both in the country and abroad, that has completely blurred and distorted the facts of the past, present and the future of the Yugoslav peoples and their mutual relations. This is why the principal precondition for peace to be restored in these lands is to establish and promote the truth about the Yugoslav crisis.

In order that the truth may be known on the broadest possible scale, my principal concern in this letter is to brief you on a terrifying event.

On the Catholic Christmas, 25 December 1993, the Bishop's residence in Karlovac, Republic of Croatia, which is the seat of the Gornji Karlovac Eparchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church, was blown up with mines. The building is of major importance and is valuable not only for the Serbian Orthodox Church but more generally, having been classified as a protected monument of culture. Apart from flats for the clergy which were on the same floor, the ground floor housed a treasury containing valuable items dating from the 15th to the 19th centuries. These valuables were looted by the Ustashis during the Second World War and were returned to the Serbian Orthodox Church only in 1985. This is yet another fact that testifies to the continuity of the attitude towards the Serbs in evidence among the Croatian leadership in the Second World War and the present authorities in the Republic of Croatia.

Since 18 September 1991, there have been no Serb clergymen either in the building or in the town, as they had been forced to flee from Karlovac and from Croatia to save their lives. The same also applies to the four other Serbian Orthodox bishoprics in Croatia, to which the Serbian clergy was refused access and where they were kept from performing their work, both as a result of the destruction of buildings in Pakrac and Zagreb and now also in Karlovac, and of the clergy being unable to remain there under threat of physical liquidation.

The Bishop's residence in Karlovac was situated at the corner of the Radiceva and Mazuranoviceva Street. The way in which it was torn down is very telling, most probably by laying mines in two places, which almost totally destroyed the corner part of the building, while the parts facing other buildings, particularly those facing a Catholic building, were damaged less heavily, so that the adjacent buildings did not suffer any major damage. This testifies to the expertise of the explosive layers.

The perpetrator of the above-mentioned crime, by this act, and particularly in view of the time when the mining took place, not only dealt a blow to the sentiments of the Serbian people and Orthodox believers, but also to Catholics, by usurping their Christmas tranquillity and defiling the holy feast, as well as those of all honest people, both the pious and atheists who respect other people's thoughts, convictions and beliefs and have a sense of dutiful piety for cultural values.

What is particularly disquieting in connection with the demolition of the Orthodox Bishop's residence in Karlovac is the fact that though the media and the authorities in the Republic of Croatia denounced this act in their official statements, they none the less sought to justify it on the grounds of an alleged conspiracy having been plotted against Croatia in that very building, even though, as I have already mentioned, the Residence had been abandoned by the Serbian clergy way back in September 1991.

Finally, I wish to recall that on 19 July 1993 the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas in Karlovac dating from the 18th century was devastated, and that an explosive charge was laid and set off in the local Orthodox cemetery.

The event I have referred to above is but the most recent in a spate of vandal terrorist raids on the buildings of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Croatia and the former Bosnia-Herzegovina, as reported on two occasions by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Mr. Vladislav Jovanovic, to the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

This crime, as well as a whole series of similar events which we have reported to you, are a very conspicuous lesson, not only symbolically but also quite directly on the status of Orthodoxy and the whole Serbian people in the war-afflicted territories, as to what their position would have been had they not put up resistance to the assaults by the authorities of the Republic of Croatia and the Croatian-Muslim coalition in the former Bosnia-Herzegovina. And those totally unprovoked assaults on the Serbs and their property were the overture to the war, while the Serb resistance was only self-defence, of necessity.

On the other hand, ecclesiastical buildings of non-Orthodox confessions all over the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, contrary to what has been mentioned in the earlier reports of the Special Rapporteur on the former Yugoslavia, Mr. T. Mazowiecki, have come out virtually without a scratch, which is also indicative, not only figuratively but also literally, of the status non-Serbs and non-Montenegrins and non-Orthodox believers enjoy in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

I am convinced that this letter will help the truth come out more clearly about the events in the former Yugoslavia and that you will do all you can within your mandate for this truth to be grasped by all relevant fora and the world public as soon and as widely as possible. It is only in this way that we can successfully accomplish our joint task, which is to bring peace to the former Yugoslavia and provide tranquillity to all nations in these lands which seem to be doomed by history to unending pain and suffering.

Please accept, dear Sir, the assurances of my highest consideration.

(signed)

Margit Savovic
Federal Minister